

SHERMAN, LAURENCE V.

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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

Lawrence Y. Sherman

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LAWRENCE Y. SHERMAN,
ILLINOIS.

United States Senate,

WASHINGTON, D. C.
February 17, 1916

Mr. Albert H. Griffith,
Fisk, Wisconsin.

Dear Mr. Griffith:

I have your request of the fourteenth for
a copy of my address delivered on February twelfth at
Springfield, Illinois before the Lincoln Centennial Association.
This has not yet been put in print and should it be printed
later I will forward you a copy. I am enclosing a carbon
copy herewith for use at this time.

Very truly yours,

L. Y. Sherman

LINCOLN and the COMMONPLACE.

February 12th, 1916, Springfield, Ill.

by

Senator Lawrence Y. Sherman.

Poverty and obscurity are a better birthright to a noble mind than a scepter and a crown. The mortal dust of a thousand kings is mingled with the earth. The shouts of the applauding multitudes are silent forever. The diadem and the throne are vanished. No responsive voices answer the roll call of their forgotten names.

Avarice with the fabled touch of Midas can neither grasp nor understand the imperishable rights of humanity and justice. The comradeship of toil is the threshold of sympathetic understanding. Few patricians enter there. It is denied to the idler and the sluggard. It comes only to those who have struggled with adverse fate, with disappointment and discouragement, with hardship and neglect, who have known sorrow and felt the chill when fortune turned her face away.

How common the steps by which the lowly rise, who toil with human hands in field or mill, in soil or shop. How trivial the first crude efforts that mark the beating wing of the chainless mind before it takes its flight to the realm of thought and action. The humble task well done is then the certain step to other things.

Nothing but the elemental survives. Every atom and fiber of the elements are commonplace. There is no short and sunny road to ability and high achievement. The nettles and stones and dust of drudgery beset the way where genius travels to its lofty goal. The easy road leads to the mediocre and decay.

Genius is the miracle of translated toil. In that dim region where thought human labor is born the joyful drudgery of plants its impressions. It stores memories' vast warehouse with the spoils of the ages and experience. It measures, weighs, appraises and reasons. It tills the field where the mind's eternal mystery asserts its changeless sway and where immortality dwains on human faith and understanding. Genius is not mere intellect, neither is it knowledge. It is both combined with understanding and ceaseless labor lighted with love and faith. The mere logician lacks the statesman's faith and hope and sympathetic perception of the years to come. Genius is akin to religion in which our mother's hope and undying faith is better than the wise man's knowledge.

Small wonder it is that Lincoln seemed to some a mystic. He had come a long

journey from his lowly cabin to the martyr's grave. Nothing escaped his attention on the way. He saw and understood the relation of the commonplace things and acts of life to greater deeds. His hands first earned his daily bread. His mind and character irresistibly marked him for other things. He saw and applied the eternal operation of moral truths in the affairs of men. He knew such truth linked his generation with the unrevealed future and reached into the realms of immortality. Because of this some times politicians could not understand his politics, nor statesmen his statesmanship. He wrought his craft on a higher level than the average man. His achievements challenged the attention of the historian, the statesman and philosopher.

Every day some one says the age of miracles is past. No one knows if this is so for ^{how} few would be convinced if one were wrought. Those who saw it would not believe. Those who were told of it would say it never happened. The few who believed and avowed their faith would be stigmatized as dupes or liars. As age and experience come upon us we become prosaic. World wearied mankind is wedded to the commonplace. The level of the average man and the average things stretches out in a seemingly boundless plain before the routine of daily life. There sometimes seems to be novelty only for the young, the inexperienced. They alone turn the pages of life and read each one as something new. The stoic who says there is nothing new under the sun however is in grievous error. Novelty relates alone to human life. Life had its morning, noon and night. To each who live through mankind's seven successive stages each experience and revelation are new. No one but a cynic ever loses his love of the commonplace and ^{its} relation to the larger accomplishments of a completed life. It is only near its close each learns there is little new except human love and human sorrow. Then we know that each has traveled with us as an inseparable companion whose shadow follows us from the beginning to the end.

Across the even plain of commonplace life there walk some in their generation who see beneath the common things and beyond the average man. So many of the uncommon ones have risen from the ranks of humble circumstance. How little we know after all of those common things of earth and air and light and darkness, of heat and cold and fire and water and life and death. They are all matters of fact. When we strive to go back of them, how we stumble. The scientist penetrates a little way and loses himself in definitions. The philosopher meditates and after

weary thought returns to the faith of his childhood. Literature explores its realms and at last stops at the same limitations that bar unlettered life. The chemist in his laboratory gropes among his combinations and symbols only to stop at the barrier. Here and there patient research grasps some vital truth and when it is known the multitude marvel at its simplicity. The inventor charts an unknown method to use nature's forces to build for human good. Millions travel then the way that has been blazed and use inventions as the alphabet of a new industrial life. The mystic and ^{the} dreamer dwell in a world that others think a region of miracle or superstition or the supernatural.

Upon every one of us nature makes as large a demand on our belief as miracles do on our faith. The first blade of grass or the first leaf that bent to the breath of spring is as great a miracle as the resurrection of our human dead. What does mere reason know of either? Nature practices an alchemy we do not understand. From inert earth and sun and rain and soil she brings forth plant life in its multitudinous forms of use and beauty. From the dead and lifeless substances human life builds its mortal habitation in which it dwells to live and act during its allotted span. Through it all some subtle chemistry defies the wit of man. We only see what nature does. How or from what source it comes we know no more than the first one to ponder over the inscrutable mystery.

In the routine deeds of life when does the alchemy of human affairs translate the commonplace to the heroic and the sublime? Greatness is an accumulation to which many contribute and one crowns it all. History and fame write high the name who executes the will and directs the purpose of many but Lincoln never forgot the many from whose ranks he sprang.

Lincoln once despondently said that if he were to die he had joined his name with no enduring question that would make him remembered by his generation. Within seven years he had been elected President a second time, a great civil war had been carried to a successful conclusion, slavery had been stricken from all the states, the republic finally dedicated to the principle that all men are free, the Union preserved, the government had emerged from the supreme test in strength, stability and honor and Lincoln, dead by an assassin's hand, had passed into the ages as one of the colossal figures in the world's history.

The world learned of him and his abilities in seven years. The United States first heard of him in 1858. Few outside of Illinois knew of him before that time.

Major John A. Wakefield served in the Black Hawk War of 1832 and 1833. Lincoln was a

captain in that war and later a private by reenlistment. Wakefield's history of the Black Hawk War does not mention Lincoln's name.

Henry Brown wrote Illinois history in a book of some hundreds of pages. It ended in 1844. Lincoln was then thirty-five years old. His name is not found in this history.

Governor John Reynolds wrote Illinois history to July 4, 1855. His name does not appear in his pages. He was in his forty-seventh year when that historian ended his labors.

Frederick Gerhart wrote Illinois history to 1856. Lincoln was then in his forty-eighth year. His name does not appear.

Thomas Ford was Governor of Illinois and widely acquainted in the state. In the preface to his history of Illinois which chronicles men and events to 1847 he says:

"I wrote about small events and little men for two reasons. First there was nothing else to write about and second those small matters seemed best calculated to illustrate what I wanted to promulgate among the people."

In the body of the history he says:

"Sangamon County, Illinois, was then represented by two senators and seven representatives called the 'long nine' all whigs but one. Among them were some dexterous jugglers in politics whose whole object was to obtain the seat of government at Springfield."

Lincoln's first appearance between the lids of a book found in the libraries is therefore as "a dexterous political juggler." At the time Ford closed his history Lincoln was thirty-eight years old. The last edition of the Western Annals wrote history to 1856. He was then past forty-seven years old. His name does not appear in its many hundreds of pages. It might be said that those local historians looked backward rather than to the present. It cannot be denied that they wrote of many living men. It is apparent that Lincoln did not fall within their horizon at the several dates named as a commanding figure within the ken of the historian. Let me add that another of the "small men" of whom Ford wrote was Stephen A. Douglas. In the few years that followed the last words that fell from the local historian's pen both Lincoln and Douglas became candidates for the presidency. One rent asunder by ^{the} violence of divergent opinion on disunion and slavery the ancient democratic party. Douglas received 62% of the popular vote of that party and Breckenridge 38%. Lincoln received the entire vote of his particular party. Reduced to percentages the two "little men" of whom Ford wrote in 1847, and other historians ignored, divided 70%

of the voting population of the United States. Lincoln received 40% and Douglas 30%. Lincoln went to the presidency to face a great rebellion and successfully to administer the government through the greatest peril which it has encountered since its formation. Douglas went, it is true, to defeat, and in a few months to his death, but let it be recorded, ever remembered and gratefully acknowledged tonight, that he was infinitely greater in death than he was in life. With his last words he cast his mighty influence for the preservation of the Union and the suppression of armed rebellion.

Lincoln dwelt with the commonplace, with the ordinary man, with the average litigation, with the average juror. He walked on mother earth ~~amidst~~ amidst common things living the greater part of his life in hardship and wearying trials. Obscurity and poverty were his early companions. He studied the same few books and learned the same simple truths that others learned or might have learned in his time. He is a great example that it is not a glut of many books that gives understanding. It is the digestion and assimilation of a few good ones that help form human character. Not a book, not a commonplace thing, not an advantage that Lincoln had is not open to every American boy in the republic today. How common it all seems.

But few men are living today who remember the abuse that Lincoln endured. We are prone to think that modern politics has degenerated. It has only perpetuated its evils. He said on one occasion that he who was forgiving and friendly by nature seemed to be fated always to be in struggles that roused great personal bitterness. How strange it sounds today to repeat what was said of him while he carried the burdens of the last sad years of his life. Said one vehement critic:

"Notwithstanding the emptiness of Mr. Lincoln's mind I think we shall yet succeed in making this a decent land to live in. With chronic whig distrust and ignorance of the people Lincoln halts and fears. He is a first rate second rate man."

Once more the critic spoke:

"I want somebody to occupy the presidential chair who believes in God and the people, in justice and the masses."

This was said in May 1863. Again in 1863 these unkind words were spoken:

"Cease to lean on the government at Washington. It is a broken reed, if not worse. We will lose unless the people are able to ride out the storm without the captain or the pilot. We must remember the very prejudices and moral callousness which made Lincoln in 1860 an available candidate when anger and half educated parties were struggling for victory necessarily makes him a poor leader, rather ~~than~~ no leader at all in a crisis like this."

These depressing sentiments fell from the lips of the greatest platform orator and superb agitator of his generation Wendell Phillips. ^{ff} History and the impartial tribunal before which posterity has rendered its verdict acclaim how much greater Lincoln was than all his critics. How from their acrid words and their bitterness, their contemptuous dislike, and the vast clamor of the many tongued free press, he came unscathed! Even from those instruments which aimed to destroy he forged the weapons of righteousness in great emergencies. Above the injustice and the bitterness he rose serene and triumphant and wrote the ^{all over} closing of the bloody drama until the curtain fell on mortal gaze. He translated the commonplace of his early life by the strange alchemy of his nature to the high level of great creative statesmanship and the sublimity of enduring moral truths embodied in administration. We will not try to analyze, we will only stop to note, to revere and admire, to pay our respects and our sincere homage to the simple, powerful character that built out of the routine of prosaic life a mighty structure of noble deeds. Let it sink deep into our convictions tonight the great war in which Lincoln was the central figure would have ended in half the time, ^{saved} ~~been~~ half a million lives and countless treasure if the Union had been prepared to fight when Sumter fell in April 1861.

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